

PIERRE RYCKMANS
CHINA SPECIALIST, PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL
AND AUTHOR OF A MINOR LITERARY MASTERPIECE
1935-2014

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There have been many tributes to Pierre Ryckmans, the Belgium-born sinologist, writer, critic, translator, art historian and public intellectual, since his death on 11 August, aged 79. Some have come from people in this country who knew him personally, like Peter Craven in the *Australian* and Murray Bail in the *Monthly*; many other obituaries have appeared in international newspapers, journals and on radio. They are evidence of the esteem in which Ryckmans and his literary incarnation, Simon Leys, were held both here and abroad. It is not often that a writer of such international standing decides to make his home in Australia, to the great benefit of Australian public life and letters.

A bright future was no doubt expected of Pierre Ryckmans when he was born into an eminent Belgian family in Brussels on 28 September 1935. His grandfather was vice-president of the Senate, his father was a publisher and one uncle was governor-general of the Belgian Congo. Another uncle, who was a world authority on Arabic inscriptions, taught at the Catholic University of Louvain. Pierre would also study there, firstly law as was expected, then art history. He had attended primary school at the local Servites de Marie School, followed by the diocesan college of Braine-l'Alleud. Although Pierre Ryckmans was unconventional in some ways, he never wavered from the unshakeable Christian faith he acquired at the college, especially from one of his teachers, the abbé Voussure.

His love of Chinese culture, art and literature began when he visited China in 1955 as a nineteen-year-old student. As he could not study in China itself, he went to Taiwan and then to Singapore and Hong Kong. He was not originally very interested in Chinese politics, but the Cultural Revolution, which he observed from beginning to end in Hong Kong, forced him to see Maoist rule for what it was, putting him at odds with the more idealised view held by many Western intellectuals at that time. Ryckmans was persuaded to come to Australia to teach at the Australian National University in 1970, a year before the publication of *Les Habits neufs du président Mao* [*The*

Chairman's New Clothes], his first book on China. This was followed by *Ombres chinoises* [*Chinese Shadows*] in 1974 and the third of the trilogy, *Images brisées* [*Broken Images*], in 1976. In France his controversial views were supported by René Étiemble and Jean-François Revel, but loudly condemned by the Maoists of *Le Monde* and the *Tel Quel* group, especially Philippe Sollers, who later admitted that he had been wrong. In Australia he came into conflict with the historian Ross Terrill.

The importance of his books on China sometimes seems to overshadow Ryckmans' widely acclaimed contribution to literature: the long entry on him in French Wikipedia only mentions his novella, *La Mort de Napoléon* [*The Death of Napoleon*] in the list of works and prizes. First published in 1986, this multi-layered fable imagines Napoleon escaping from St Helena as a cabin hand on a crayfish schooner, having been replaced on the island by a look-alike. However, the intricate mechanism of the secret escape plan breaks down because of a ludicrously insignificant incident; once landed in Europe Napoleon has to fulfil his destiny alone and unknown. The situation is made even more difficult by the untimely demise of his replacement on St Helena. Everyone, including his remaining devoted followers, thinks that Napoleon is dead.

The Death of Napoleon has been called a classic and a gem. It is an intriguing tragi-comic tale of the man overtaken by his myth and of blind belief in heroic destiny, as well as a moving contemplation of mortality and what is truly important in a human life. The book was translated into ten languages, won many prizes for its author and translator, and was made into a film with Ian Holm as Napoleon. I had the pleasure of translating this modern *conte moral*, expressed in exquisite French of both great clarity and fine nuance, the best characteristics of the French language. It is also writing that pays to be read aloud. Pierre Ryckmans told me that the sound and rhythm of the language were as important to him as the meaning. All these qualities combine to make *The Death of Napoleon* an outstanding piece of literature. I was naturally disappointed to learn that by the time Simon Leys wanted something of his translated again, he thought that with the help of a good editor his English was good enough for him to do it himself. He went on to translate various works including the *Analects* of Confucius.

In one letter to me Pierre included a hand-drawn cartoon of rather spiky figures with the dialogue in Latin. This seemed to typify several aspects of his mind and work. It is not generally known that he was a

talented caricaturist who illustrated his daughter Jeanne's book for children, *Les Deux Acrobates* [*The Two Acrobats*] (1988). The cartoon also gives a hint of the breadth, if not the depth, of his knowledge and interests. Quite apart from Chinese and French literature, Ryckmans was also widely read in German, Russian and especially English. Murray Bail reports that he would often begin speaking to his wife Hanfang in English, change to French and finish the sentence in Mandarin. Although involved and interested in his country of adoption, especially its art, he did not publish a great deal about Australia. However, his main contribution, *Les Naufragés du Batavia: suicide de Prosper* [*The Wreck of the Batavia*] (2005) won the Prix Guizot-Calvados in France. This life-long love of the sea culminated in a two-volume study of the sea in French literature from François Rabelais to Pierre Loti, which was published in 2003.

Despite the international scope of his linguistic and literary interests, Ryckmans remained very much a European. In many ways a conservative, he never wavered from his traditional Catholic faith, and he was fond of English Catholic writers including G. K. Chesterton and Evelyn Waugh. He was also a great admirer of Montaigne and Orwell, and these various facets of his mind can be seen in his essays, articles and broadcasts. There too he was no stranger to controversy. He wrote a long critique of André Gide and defended Mother Teresa against Christopher Hitchens. He held traditional views on the value of literature and the purpose of a university, deploring the increasing tendency towards a utilitarian model. His last work, published in 2011, was a collection of essays, *The Hall of Uselessness*. Pierre Ryckmans was an internationally acclaimed China specialist, the author of an outstanding literary work, one of Australia's leading public intellectuals and a true Renaissance man.

Melbourne